DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 396 564 FL 023 926

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TITLE Indigenous Mexican Culture's Influence upon the Reading Preferences of Chicana and Chicano Middle-School Students.
PUB DATE 94
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Reading Association (39th, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 1994).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cultural Awareness; *Cultural Education; *Indigenous Populations; Intermediate Grades; Junior High Schools; *Mexican Americans; Middle Schools; *Reading Habits; *Reading Interests; Student Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS *Middle School Teachers

ABSTRACT

A study investigated the effects of instruction in indigenous Mexican culture on Chicana and Chicano adolescents' reading preferences. Subjects, 81 Mexican-American students in a Southwestern middle school, were administered a culture interest inventory as a pre- and post-test for identifying reading preferences. Students participated in 4 days of lectures and presentations on use of the Nahuatl language, Aztec dance, the Aztec calendar, and Mesoamerican pyramids by an authority on indigenous Mexican culture. Related information was also presented throughout the school year. Results indicate that student interest in and voluntary selection of texts on Mexican culture increased. Teachers who support and encourage this interest are seen as valuable agents of literacy for minority students who might otherwise not have access to these topics through literature. (Author/MSE)

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ED 396 564

# Indigenous Mexican Culture's influence upon the reading preferences of Chicana and Chicano middle-school students

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A paper presented at the 39th Annual Convention for the International Reading Association; 1994, Toronto, Canada.

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Abstract

This study investigates how instruction in indigenous Mexican culture can influence Chicana and Chicano middle-school students to voluntarily change their reading preferences. Data is gathered from a pre and post survey; as well as, qualitative measures that analyze and interpret classroom journal entries by student. Participants in the study include students, teachers, and a guest speaker who is an authority on indigenous Mexican culture. After participating in a series of lectures and presentations about indigenous Mexican culture, students were more inclined to select reading texts that reflected an active interest in examining cultural issues that were elicited by the program. Student interest was spiked, and teachers who encouraged and supported this increased student interest for exploring topics related to cultural ancestry are seen as valuable agents of literacy for minority students that may have otherwise not been inclined to explore these topics through literature.

Demographics indicate that there will be a considerable increase in the minority population in the United States and by the year 2020 it is projected that one-third of Americans will be non-Anglo (Wyatt, 1992). The ethnic majority within that increasing population will consist of Chicanas and Chicanos, or Mexican-Americans. If educators are to address the literacy needs of Chicana and Chicano students, they need to examine cultural issues beyond surface level literacy instruction. Bilingual and ESL programs have a cultural component to their curriculum; however, this cultural component has traditionally fallen short of adequately addressing the depth of knowledge within indigenous Mexican culture. Mainstream curriculum has also neglected addressing the details of this ancestral knowledge, and there has traditionally been a vacuum for Chicana and Chicano students learning basic elements of their ancestral culture from the public school system. This is partly because the dominant majority culture has traditionally subordinated the cultural knowledge of minorities as less important. Understanding the cultural issues that Chicana and Chicano students confront within the present educational system is perhaps one of the paths toward resolving the deficits between the literacy of majority and minority culture students. Addressing the cultural ancestry of the Chicana and Chicano student, or any student, could be a precursor leading toward positive experiences with literacy in the classroom.

Chicana and Chicano adolescents identify with the symbols of their culture such as the Mesoamerican pyramid and the Aztec calendar, but they know very little about what the Mesoamerican pyramid was used for or how to read the Aztec calendar. Chicana and Chicano students are grounded in indigenous Mexican culture. It is evident in the food they eat, their physical appearance, and even their present-day usage of words which have come from the Náhuatl language such as coyote, tomato, potato, and slang such as chicle (gum) and itzcuintli (small person). Knowledge of ancestral culture has been viewed as one of the major influences

allowing for student success at school (Caplan, et. al. 1992). Instruction related to Chicana and Chicano students' ancestry could be used in the classroom for achieving the optimum literacy goals of teachers and students.

The Aztec calendar and the Mesoamerican pyramid could be used in the multicultural classroom as astronomical clocks, just as they were once implemented by Mexican ancestors. These identifying symbols of Mexican culture have traditionally been viewed by most Chicana and Chicano students as aesthetic icons with no practical purpose. These icons are used to define their identity. Examples of this pervade Mexican-American culture: The Aztec calendar has been often emblazoned on commercial food wrappers and restaurant menus to establish ethnic identity. Once the student becomes engaged in learning about their cultural identity, one of the ways they begin to express a positive interest in other facets of their ancestry is through voluntary reading preferences.

The integration of indigenous Mexican culture into the school curriculum grew out of the influence of community support groups in the Southwest, composed largely of parents of students, who recognized the cultural instruction that was being neglected by the school. The innovation of this cultural instruction is that it comes from the bottom/up through the advocacy of the working-class community, as opposed to the top/down multicultural instruction that has usually been defined by university-educated professionals.

The majority culture in the United States has oppressed Native-Americans in the past, and that has influenced the belief-systems of contemporary Chicanas and Chicanos. Although many advances have been made by the majority culture in understanding indigenous culture, there are still some implicit beliefs that exist that 'Indian' things are inferior. This can be observed through an example of a Chicano Cálo word: "tonto." In an English context, it can be used to describe the "Lone Ranger's" trusted Indian ally, but in the Mexican context it used to describe

someone as "stupid." Many such examples exist in Chicana and Chicano belief systems.

As the students develop an understanding of the symbols of their culture, they establish a positive identity with their indigenous origin and break down denigrating beliefs about their ancestry. Subsequently, this is evidenced through the students' voluntary investigation and reading of texts that they otherwise would have not been inclined to investigate. The purpose of this study is to describe the extent to which a cultural ancestral program influences Chicana and Chicano students.

## Methodology

The effect of instruction on indigenous Mexican culture upon Chicana and Chicano middle-school students is analyzed through a pre and post survey measuring reading preferences. Qualitative measures include an analysis and interpretation of classroom journals maintained by the students.

The setting for the study was a middle-school in the Southwest during the normal school year. The participants included 81 Mexican-American students, their teachers, and a guest-speaker who is an authority on indigenous Mexican culture. A culture interest inventory was given to the students in a pretest and post-test to identify reading preferences. Both teachers and students participated in four days of lectures and presentations on indigenous Mexican culture. Knowledge related to the indigenous Mexican culture was also supported throughout the rest of the academic year. An environment was created whereby students felt comfortable about exploring their cultural ancestry.

The unique instructional curriculum that was used as a treatment familiarizes the participants with four basic elements of indigenous Mexican culture: the use of the Náhuatl language, Aztec Dance, the Aztec Calendar, and the Mesoamerican Pyramids. Through these traditional symbols of Mexican identity, a teacher/student dialogue is created from which Chicana and Chicano students identify with their

ancestral culture. This begins to be a source of pride for students who may have been stigmatized for identifying with their ancestral culture.

The instruction emphasizes values that are common to all human beings. These include instilling a sense of respect for some of the basic elements of indigenous culture: water, earth, fire, and air. These concepts repeatedly manifest themselves in the Aztec calendar and the Aztec Dance. Students begin to have a positive experience embracing their ancestral identity through literature.

## Results

Instruction on indigenous Mexican culture is a positive influence upon the reading preferences of Chicana and Chicano students. This was evidenced through the increase of voluntary selection of texts on Mexican culture. Student interest was spiked, and students voluntarily read about such topics they listed as:

- Aztecs
- Aztec History
- Indians
- Anthropology
- Native-Americans
- Mexican history
- Mexican Revolution
- Pancho Villa
- Low Rider Magazines
- Unexplained things that we've rapped mostly about
- Mexican Heroes
- Mexican Indians
- Places about Mexico

Narratives by the students also supported this viable method of cultural instruction. Students who are not of Mexican descent could also benefit by this instruction because they could expand their understanding of another culture.

Teacher participation is important because it is they who can reinforce cultural knowledge in the classroom. Teachers who are sensitized to the importance

of ancestral culture of students are key mediums for eliciting favorable responses from the students and engaging them in a meaningful interaction with literacy.

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